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An Examination of the 1917-1918 U-Boat Campaign in Light of
B.H. Liddell Hart's Theories of Indirect Approach

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One of the most prolific critics of military strategy following World War I, B.H. Liddell Hart sought alternatives to the Western Front's mechanics of mass slaughter which yielded neither decisive tactical success nor attainment of strategic military objectives and hence denied achievement of national objectives. Inspired by Sun Tzu's concept of the cheng (direct) and ch'i (indirect) forces, Liddell Hart developed a theory of strategy of the indirect approach, which advocated a war of maneuver in both the physical and psychological plane, and endorsed attack on the economic nervous system of the enemy as a minimum risk, minimum cost alternative to physical destruction of the mass of the enemy's force.¹ Examining two hundred and eighty military campaigns from thirty major conflicts over twenty five centuries of warfare, Liddell Hart suggested that the grand strategy of indirect approach offered the best hope and most frugal means of achieving strategic success.² He identified a significant number of examples where national strategists selected the indirect approach as a measure of last resort, and by that selection obtained success when the direct approach would have brought failure. His analysis continued to the conclusion that the indirect approach is always superior to the direct approach, and had wider applicability - a law of life in all spheres, a truth of philosophy. According to Liddell Hart, "the indirect approach is as fundamental to the realm of politics as to the realm of sex".³ Does the theory of indirect approach stand scrutiny? Is it possible to defeat an industrialized nation without committing mass on mass, achieving concentration of force, and pitting that force against the decisive point? Or is Liddell Hart guilty of selective historical analysis? We shall examine Liddell Hart's theory of indirect approach against the experiences of the Imperial German Navy during the unrestricted U-Boat Campaign of 1917-1918,

¹ John Shy, "Jomini", Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 181-2.

² Liddell Hart, B.H. Strategy (Meridian/Penguin Books, London, 1991) 145.

³ Liddell Hart, xx.

to determine if Liddell Hart's ideas are validated.

Liddell Hart defines strategy as "the art of distributing and applying means to fulfill the ends of policy".⁴ He suggests that strategy depends for success on a sound calculation and coordination of the end and the means. That calculation might determine that the balance of force is unfavorable, or too finely balanced to achieve the desired end; in which case the limitation of military effort may be desirable while economic or naval action decides the issue. Thus fighting power is just one of the instruments of strategy; financial, diplomatic, commercial and ethical tools are equally powerful instruments in weakening an opponent's will.⁵

In December of 1916, Germany found her continental strategy stalemated. The Battle of the Somme and Verdun had severely drained German manpower; the Russians had defeated Austria-Hungary; Rumania had joined the Allies. At sea, the modest German tactical success at Jutland did not translate into command of the sea; the British blockade remained intact, with increasing effectiveness particularly against Germany's civilian population. The direct approach of force on land and at sea was clearly failing. The only strategic alternative available to break the deadlock and achieve war termination on terms favorable to Germany was the conduct of an unrestricted submarine campaign against shipping. Admiral von Holtzendorf, Chief of the German Naval Staff, argued his case to the General Staff by stating:

"A decision must be reached before the autumn of 1917, if the war is not to end in the exhaustion of all parties, and consequently disastrous for us. Of our enemies, Italy and France are economically so hard hit that they are only upheld by England's energy and activity. If we can break England's back the war will at once be decided in our favor. England's mainstay is her shipping, which brings to the British Isles the necessary supplies of food and materials for war industries, and ensures

⁴ Liddell Hart, 321.

⁵ Liddell Hart, 322.

their solvency abroad."⁶

The strategic calculus of von Holtzendorf estimated that Britain was supplied by 10.75 million tons of shipping (6.75 million tons British, 3 million tons neutral, 0.9 million tons captured shipping). Based on German experience during operations under Prize Regulations of sinking 80,000 tons per month, and 350,000 tons per month under the restricted campaigns of 1915 and 1916, plus a doubling in the size of the U-Boat fleet since 1914, the German Navy could reasonably expect to sink 600,000 tons of British shipping per month in an unrestricted campaign. Additionally this would deter an additional 1.2 million tons of neutral shipping from trade. Cumulatively, over a five month period, this would destroy 39% of British shipping resources because

"England would not be able to stand that ... I do not hesitate to assert that as matters now stand, we can force England to make peace in five months by means of an unrestricted U-Boat campaign ... the break with America must be accepted; we have no choice but to do so. In spite of the danger of a breach with America, unrestricted U-Boat war, started soon, is the proper and indeed the only way to end the war with victory".⁷

German General Staff rebuttals questioned whether the U-Boat operational cycle would not induce fluctuations in the required number of monthly sinkings, highlighted the less than rigorous analysis on Allied tonnage replacement and anticipated countermeasures, and cautioned against U.S. and neutral reaction to an unrestricted campaign. But a lack of alternative options, militarization of the national decision making process, an increasing diet of turnips, and a sense of desperation led to the German High Command endorsement of the unrestricted U-Boat campaigns - the indirect approach - as the means to win the war. This decision was classic Liddell Hart in conception, and as we shall see, in execution.

Liddell Hart states that the purpose of strategy is to diminish the

⁶ V.E. Tarrant, The U-Boat Offensive, 1914-1945, (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1989) 44.

⁷ V.E. Tarrant, 44.

possibility of resistance, seeking to fulfill this purpose by exploiting the elements of movement and surprise.⁸ In this vein, Germany did not notify the neutral governments of the change in the nature of the submarine campaign until the day before it commenced. Simultaneous disclosure and prosecution would be the best way

"to achieve the psychological effect on the population of Britain and the deterrent effect on the neutral powers which was an essential factor in the whole plan".⁹

Liddell Hart articulates the aim of strategy as

"not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not in itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this".¹⁰

Acknowledging the threat of the United States, the German General Staff was confident that the U-Boats could starve Britain into submission before U.S. troops could arrive in numbers sufficient to affect the situation on the Western Front. In fact, the German Navy was so confident of success in its campaign against shipping that it anticipated being able to prevent the arrival of American troops in Europe in any significant numbers.¹¹

Liddell Hart stipulates that strategic dislocation is the aim of strategy; it is physically achieved by upsetting the enemy's dispositions and by compelling a change of front; separating an opponent's forces; endangering an opponent's supplies; and menacing his lines of retreat. Psychologically it is achieved by inducing the feeling of being trapped.¹² Within the time frame February - April 1917, 1.9 million tons of Allied and neutral shipping went to the bottom; one of every four ships that left Britain was sunk; Britain was replacing one ship for every ten sunk; wheat supplies in Britain went down to

⁸ Liddell Hart, 323.

⁹ V.E. Tarrant, 46.

¹⁰ Liddell Hart, 325.

¹¹ V.E. Tarrant, 45.

¹² Liddell Hart, 327.

a six week reserve, Russia withdrew from the war, at least in part, because of the effect of strategic blockade.¹³ Neutral shipping was clearly intimidated by German attack. Norwegian, Danish, Dutch and Swedish ships all but ceased to trade with Britain, and about half of the neutral ships already in British ports refused to sail. The overall result was a 75% reduction in neutral shipping engaged in the British trade.¹⁴ Strategic dislocation at the physical level was clearly achieved. More striking, however, was the psychological paralysis affecting the British Navy. Admiral Jellicoe, the First Sea Lord, admitted to Admiral Sims, USN:

"It is impossible for us to go on with the war, if losses like this continue ... Is there no solution for the problem? Absolutely none that we can see now."¹⁵

By 1 August an additional 1.8 million tons had been sunk, and the U-Boat commanders actually achieved the goal von Holtzendorf set for them at campaign's start. The irony of war at this moment was captured by American Ambassador Walter Page in a letter to President Wilson when he wrote

"At the present rate of destruction more than four million tons will be sunk before the summer is gone. Such is this dire submarine danger. The English thought they controlled the sea; the Germans, that they were invincible on land. Each side is losing where it thought itself strongest."¹⁶

Liddell Hart's basis of strategy is that effective concentration can only be obtained when the opposing forces are dispersed; and usually, in order to ensure this one's own forces must be widely distributed. Hence, paradoxically, true concentration is the product of dispersion, or restated, fluidity of force may succeed where concentration of force merely entails a

¹³ Steven E. Ambrose, "Seapower in World Wars I and II", To Use the Sea, Readings in Seapower and Maritime Affairs, ed F.C. Rouse (Naval Institute Press, 1977), 17-18.

¹⁴ V.E. Tarrant, 47.

¹⁵ John Terraine, The U-Boat Wars 1916-1945, (G.P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 1989), 48.

¹⁶ John Terraine, 62.

perilous rigidity.¹⁷ U-Boat attacks ranged from the western approaches and the English Channel to the Mediterranean and the North Sea. The extent of area to defend by hunter killer forces initially achieved what Liddell Hart calls the practicable object of paralyzing the enemy's action rather than the theoretical object of crushing his forces. In fact, as a result of Britain's hunter killer groups and later the convoy protection system, Admiral Beatty (Commander-in-Chief, Grand Fleet) in an Admiralty conference in January 1918, said he no longer considered it wise to provoke a fleet action, even if an opportunity occurred, since the battle squadrons of the Grand Fleet had been deprived of their screens, and therefore in effect, were blockaded in port.¹⁸

Liddell Hart finished his thoughts on the concentrated essence of strategy with the conclusion that to achieve success, two major problems must be solved, dislocation and exploitation. He stated:

"You cannot hit the enemy with effect unless you have first created the opportunity; you cannot make that effect decisive unless you exploit the second opportunity that comes before he can recover".¹⁹

In August 1917, if Admiral von Holtzendorf had access to Liddell Hart's book Strategy, he would have concluded: a) that he had successfully defined his strategy based on an exquisite strategic calculus; b) chosen a strategy - the indirect approach, that would maximize his gains at minimum cost; c) executed his strategy to maximum psychological advantage creating severe strategic dislocation; and d) achieved enemy paralysis through his concentration by dispersal of force. He had acquired dislocation and was exploiting his advantage. By definition, or at least Liddell Hart's definition, his strategy and campaign were a success - right?

Four main elements would combine to invalidate the successful completion

¹⁷ Liddell Hart, 329, 333.

¹⁸ Steven E. Ambrose, 18.

¹⁹ Liddell Hart, 336.

of the unrestricted U-Boat campaign. First, while the American entry into the war was necessarily slow in having any military impact, the unexpected rapid mobilization of American shipyards, and the release of 500,000 tons of enemy shipping held in U.S. ports, were wholly unanticipated in the German calculus: the economic impact of America's entry in the war was badly miscalculated, and no counterweight was or could be devised.²⁰ No less disastrously, no attempt was made by the Imperial Navy to go after U.S. troop transports, although this had been part of the German strategic design at the start of the campaign.²¹ Second, the return of sufficient shipping to trade in summer 1917 enabled Britain to survive while U.S. mobilization and the benefits of the convoy system took effect because

"The need for the neutrals to continue to trade despite the German campaign was a factor in their return to British ports, but critical to their doing so was the intense political and economic pressure to which the neutrals were subjected, not to mention the lucrative financial inducements offered by Britain and the United States".²²

No counter diplomatic offensive was launched by Germany to dissuade the neutrals or provide alternative trade, and, indeed, such alternatives were beyond German reach.

Third, after significant delay at the Admiralty, Prime Minister Lloyd George pressured the Royal Navy into instituting convoy as the means of protecting shipping. This had as its principle advantage the effect of bringing the submarines to the hunters, and collecting shipping into discreet packets which made U-Boat search procedures and attack tactics significantly more challenging.²³ Implementation of the convoy system was not identical on

²⁰ Paolo E. Coletta, Seapower in the Atlantic and Mediterranean in World War I, (University Press of America, Lanham, 1989), 47.

²¹ V.E. Tarrant, 70.

²² Comment made by Dr. H.P. Willmott in the course of Topic 10 seminar discussion, Course II, National War College.

²³ Williamson Murray, " Naval Power in World War I", Seapower and Strategy, ed Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett (Tri Service Press/USNI, London, 1989), 205.

all trade routes, nor imposed simultaneously, which provided Germany tactical opportunities for exploitation and an upward spiral of German/British tactical measure and countermeasures (examples include close in-shore attacks, mining barrages, surface night attacks, increasing use of escort aircraft, etc.). A counter to the convoy was proposed by German Commodore Bauer - the wolf pack - but the command and control features necessary to execute this tactic were not available until the next U-Boat war in 1939.²⁴ No other alternatives were pursued in convoy disruption, such as employment of units of the High Seas Fleet against convoy escorts in concert with U-Boat attacks against the scattered merchantmen. In 1918 there were two destroyer raids on British convoys working the Scandinavia route, but the fact of the matter was that geographical factors and the short range of German warships precluded surface raiding whether independently or in consort with U-boats.

Finally, the indirect approach of the U-Boat campaign failed to appreciate the historical evidence which suggests that the economies of great powers, the target of U-boat offensive in 1917, possess enormous resilience and toughness,²⁵ and in 1917, after the losses of the three previous years societies were not prepared to surrender unless and until other aspects of defeat - such as military failure in the field or the prospect of impending defeat - manifested themselves. Despite the loss of 11,135,460 tons of shipping, and the deaths of over 13,333 non-combatants the British population remained resolute in support of the war effort.²⁶ If in part this resolution was the result of never being told the seriousness of the situation at sea, the fact remained

"In World War I the contemplation of great vessels suddenly smitten, perhaps in the dead of night, by shattering explosions caused by unseen foes, and rapidly disappearing under the waves with passengers and crews

²⁴ John Terraine, 120.

²⁵ John Shy, 182.

²⁶ Edwyn A. Gray, The Killing Time, the U-Boat War 1914-1918, (Charles Scribner and Sons, New York, 1972), 266.

drowned, blown up, or left exposed to lingering death in open boats, came as a deeply shocking novelty."²⁷

But it did not prevent merchant seamen from going down to the ships at sea, if only to escape from such appalling syntax. Attacking the will of the people is not the panacea that Sun Tzu, Douhet, and Liddell Hart would lead the strategist to believe.

By the end of 1917, a total of 26,404 ships had been sailed in convoy, with 147 losses. In 1918, the trend of declining number of sinkings continued because of the success of the convoy. The Germans ended the war with roughly the same number of submarines as in May 1917; still a formidable fighting force, but stifled in their ability to execute the national strategy.

Proponents of Liddell Hart's theories would suggest that the four elements of failure in the unrestricted U-Boat campaign resulted not from a fundamental flaw in the theory, but German inflexibility demonstrated by the violation of Liddell Hart's maxim "Ensure that both plan and dispositions are flexible - adaptable to circumstances."²⁸ Such individuals might also argue that the U-boat campaign against shipping was defeated by, of all things, the indirect approach in the form of the provision of escorts for convoys. Such an argument possesses a superficial plausibility in terms of an apparent dispersal of means, but not much more: convoy escort represented a concentration of resources in comparison to previous deployment of resources and convoy itself is the very essence of concentrated defense. Others might suggest that the indirect approach is applicable only in the land context, so for all the similarities in strategic forethought, the U-Boat campaign (and for that matter, any guerre de course) is outside the scope of the discussion. Given Liddell Hart's statements on the universal applicability of the indirect approach theory - he would not endorse this thesis.

²⁷ John Terraine, 146.

²⁸ Liddell Hart, 336.

Genuine problems exist in assessing the campaign against Allied shipping in 1917 and 1918 against the yardstick provided by Liddell Hart's indirect approach. There is much to be said for the view that German failure in this campaign stemmed from a more fundamental flaw in the German conduct of war than one specific concept of operations, and it may well be that a campaign could never have been prosecuted to a successful conclusion for various, specific, naval reasons - such as the difficulty in conducting a stern chase against maritime resources that displayed a flexibility that could never have been anticipated before the event. But it is hard to resist the conclusion that the theory of indirect approach is flawed for the following reasons: a) despite acknowledging that fighting power is just one of the instruments of strategy, Liddell Hart does not treat the coordination of economic, diplomatic, or ethical initiatives with the attainment of indirect military force objectives; b) maneuver warfare does not remove standing armies in the field; It may cause strategic disruption, and it may tempt the strategist to try and achieve victory on the cheap, but the economy of force may, prove to be a false economy; c) the indirect approach places undue-emphasis on the ability to impact the will of the people. A complex industrial society, threatened with national survival, and exposed to unspeakable hardship and privation will harden their will as the stakes for victory increase.

The unrestricted U-Boat campaign of 1917-1918 demonstrates that all elements of the strategic equation (force structure, doctrine, economics, diplomacy, and moral suasion) must be coordinated to achieve the strategic objective, whether approached directly or indirectly. Its outcome contradicts Liddell Hart's contention that the indirect approach is always superior to the direct approach. Nonetheless, as a strategic failure, it was a near thing.

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